

Media, terrorism, and the politics of fear

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?The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind.?

Walter Lippmann,
Public Opinion (1922)

Walk into any graduate program of journalism in the United States and you'll be hard pressed to find anyone who would disagree with the status of Walter Lippmann as one of the most influential persons in our discipline. Lippmann is most famous for the simply titled *Public Opinion* that he published in 1922 at age 32 after his stint as a propaganda leaflet writer and prisoner-of-war interrogator during World War I.

Lippmann's war experience is critical to his bleak outlook on the common person's ability to make sense of the outside world. What he found was that people in the most stressful situations were apt to cave in to outside stimuli, including messages delivered through mass communications, which more often than not were driven by cultural stereotypes. ?We do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see,? wrote Lippmann, capturing the tendency for us to default to labelling, enemy images and stereotypes that make us feel more secure in an insecure world.

Fast forward to the declaration of a war on terror on the very same day that the United States was attacked by 19 members of an otherwise unfamiliar militant Islamic terrorist organization, Al-Qaeda. Within hours after the attacks, President Bush announced to the nation in a primetime television address that ?America and our friends and allies join with all those who want peace and security in the world, and we stand together to win the war against terrorism.?

Within the blink of an eye, the surf of a channel, the click of the mouse, al-Qaeda and its ideological CEO, Osama Bin Laden, became emblazoned in the American eye as the new enemy to fear. World War IV was underway, to use the words of neoconservatives Norman Podhoretz, Eliot Cohen and former CIA Director James Woolsey that the cold war was World War III and the present war on terror was more similar to that 45-year ideological showdown between the Soviet Union and the United States.²

The Red Scare was now Militant Islam and Islamofascist ideology, and like the cold war, this conflict would be long term, require self-sacrifice, strike a tension between civil liberties and national security, and set up an environment in which no one was presumed innocent.

The stereotypical pictures in our heads of shadowy Islamic terrorists pre-empted all efforts to critically deconstruct the whys and why nows of such attacks. It seemed morally justified and efficient to follow the orders of our commander in chief who declared war on this organization. Congress handed the ersatz father of our country a blank check to use all means necessary to bring these terrorists and those who support them to justice. A lone holdout, Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D-Oakland, CA) voted no, and for that she received death threats and was called a traitor.

When asked why we were attacked, we were told it was because they hate our freedoms, they hate what we stand for, they hate our support for women's rights, and our modern ways. The state solution, the only solution considered, was a war on terror, supported by a patriotic press, to defeat the enemy and kill him before he kills us again.

The bewildered herd and the shadow world

Walter Lippmann, the erstwhile journalist and adviser to many a president revealed his attitude toward public opinion as it relates to the state: ?The public must be put in its place, so that it may

exercise its own powers, but no less and perhaps even more, so that each of us may live free of the trampling and the roar of a bewildered herd.³ Lippmann's view of a meddling public that is not thoroughly educated in matters important to the state is a widely held view today. The bewildered herd image of the public in times of terror requires complicity and duty over individual rights. When the public complains, the state response is: Which do you prefer? security or terror? A false analogy though it may be, when given that choice, how many of us would opt for security? If so, we give up some of our protected rights in order to defeat the threat.

The problem is that a declared war on terrorism is a never-ending threat. There is no projected finish line in sight, other than that the Bush administration has confirmed that this nation is likely to be engaged in a protracted war on terror for a very long time. A war on terror and militant Islam requires a complicit public that freely accepts the rationale for such a war, even with no evidence to confirm the imminence or depth of the threat. The public never has access to as much concentrated and covert information as governments do, which creates a leap of faith in all things national security.

All governments, even the most democratic, tend to eschew too much explanation for why they do things, for this only prolongs their efforts to get things done. What results is an atmosphere in which state power can go unchecked and lead to the most democratic states repressing the very civil liberties and human rights that they are said to be defending in war.

No one is ?not guilty?

In November 2002, William Safire unleashed a column onto the psyche of the American people with just three words: you are a suspect.⁴ The *New York Times* legendary Op-Ed writer identified the presence of a domestic snooping agency inside the Pentagon called Total Information Awareness (TIA), part of a post-9/11 counterterrorism matrix to mine data transfer among enemy networks. The revelation of TIA came on the heels of the short-lived Office of Strategic Influence (OSI), which included the possibility of the U.S. Government engaging in psychological operations, including planting false media stories in foreign press to throw off enemy targets and influence global public opinion in support of U.S. policies in the war on terror.

The public response to TIA was as swift and negative as it had been to OSI. And while then Defense Secretary Rumsfeld announced the shuttering of OSI, TIA never went away. It was expanded into a larger operation, the Research Development and Experimental Collaboration, which consists of 10 intelligence-gathering agencies including the National Security Agency, Defense Intelligence Agency, Central Intelligence Agency, National Counterterrorism Center and U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. None of these organizations has the public oversight, much less media coverage, of open-sourced organizations. There remain major concerns that in the government's zeal to get the bad guys, the innocent within will be caught up in the sweep.

Just six weeks after 9/11, the U.S. Congress passed the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act (USA PATRIOT Act), which six years later is little understood by the public. News reports about the contents of this sweeping piece of legislation have been sparse. What we do know is that the Act increases the authority of state agents to gather and track information through "sneak and peak searches" in private and public places.

Included in the USA PATRIOT Act is an expansion in the U.S. government's wiretapping ability, and the opportunity to subpoena any individual's records as part of any investigation into international terrorism. Such records include books checked out of public libraries, telephone calls, Internet websites visited, and university classes.

The biggest fish in the war on terror, and one who is likely not enrolled in an American university

or checking out books at the local library is Osama Bin Laden. His visage was omnipresent in the days before the re-election of President Bush in November 2004, but it worked in the administration's favour to show that we needed to stick with the commander in chief who had guided us through the years after 9/11 and who, more than his soft-hearted Democratic opponent Kerry, could see the conflict through. Osama Bin Laden's video messages, which originated as 'exclusives' to the popular Arab media TV network, Al Jazeera, did much to underscore the shadow enemy who stoked our fears of another 9/11.

It didn't matter that al-Qaeda's worldwide membership is estimated to be in the hundreds to a few thousands.⁵ In our mind's eye, that picture in our head, is that the enemy is everywhere and possibly living next door. Our world view is part real and part fabrication, a pseudo-real environment that is built from mostly what others deliver to us through the screen in image and words. The shadow world of imagination and what could happen is far more riveting and often more real than direct experience.

Terrorism, unlike traditional war, is about the mind more than it is about the body. It impresses through rumour and panic, rather than quantifiable violence. In war we expect and receive high body counts, but with terrorism, physical damage, at least in principle, is not the main objective.⁶ It is the possibility that anyone could fall victim to its violence at anytime that is much more harrowing than what might befall a volunteer combatant in some distant land. It didn't matter to any American that after initial news reports indicated over 50,000 dead inside the Twin Towers that the final number dropped to 3,000. Numbers of dead were the least of our collective global memory.

Far more riveting and horrifying were broadcasted images of planes hitting the towers hundreds of times in the weeks that followed. We told our stories of where we were standing or sitting at the time we first heard about the attack. We surfed the Internet for information about this relatively unknown terrorist organization, al Qaeda, which managed to destroy our good economy and momentarily halt regular programming and thwart advertising on our 300 million TV sets. When we returned to regular programming, advertising played on our patriotic zest to buy American and show the terrorists that they didn't win. We were knocked to our knees, but were not down for the count.

Psychologically, the world saw the sole superpower take a major hit, a surprise attack that in 82 minutes resulted in the world's most deadly case of terrorism. Against the backdrop of an interconnected global information system, what makes any terrorist act successful in the eyes of the perpetrators is that it results in a collective sense of alarm and public demand to respond swiftly to the 'senseless' violence against innocents. The weakened state cannot eradicate a global organization as easily as it can declare war against nations thought to shelter such terrorists.

In short order, the world saw videotapes of Osama Bin Laden on Al Jazeera smiling and joking with his top commanders at the success of their mission against the imperial United States, a mission that did not even predict the actual destruction of the World Trade Center. In the public mind the irrational acts of the monstrous evildoers deserved no deeper analysis other than to punish those responsible and restore collective security. The global media, in their role and function as deliverers of breaking news and bleeding leads, are cooperative players in the terrorist acts as they replay the spectacular displays of violence in celluloid, if not mythical, proportions.

Stereotyping terror

Title 22 of the United States Code defines terrorism as 'premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.'⁷ Al Qaeda, and what the media refer to as Al Qaeda linked sympathizers, is considered the greatest subnational group threat to U.S. homeland

security. The most recent country report on terrorism identifies Al Qaeda's approach as mostly mass-mediated terrorism and propaganda warfare:

"AQ still retains some operational capability and the intent to mount large-scale spectacular attacks, including on the United States and other high-profile Western targets. Overall, however, AQ's current approach focuses on propaganda warfare – using a combination of terrorist attacks, insurgency, media broadcasts, Internet-based propaganda, and subversion to undermine confidence and unity in Western populations and generate the false perception of a powerful worldwide movement."⁸

The Pentagon has told Congress it monitors 5,000 jihadi websites on the Internet alone.⁹ The dominant picture that is painted of terror in the heads of Americans is of an Arab Muslim extremist sympathetic to Al Qaeda's goals. The global news media reinforce this stereotype by presenting news in a mostly episodic frame that focuses on individual acts of violence and their aftermath over a thematic frame that places terrorism in a larger political context.¹⁰ President Bush told a shocked nation on the night of September 11, 2001 that "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining."¹¹

Within days the U.S. military response to the terror attacks was identified by the moniker Operation Enduring Freedom, which was not the original campaign name. Operation Infinite Justice was dropped in response to concerns that the U.S.-led global war on terror might offend Muslims who teach that only Allah can mete out Infinite Justice. Steven Kull, Director of the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland, testified to a U.S. House Committee in May 2007 that many Muslims believe more than ever that the United States intends to target them specifically in the war on terror.

Specifically, among the four Muslim countries polled (Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia, Morocco) eight in 10 Muslims believe that the U.S. aims to "weaken and divide the Islamic world."¹² This comes after years of billions of dollars in public diplomacy efforts to influence, engage and inform the Muslim world that the U.S. war on terror is not a war against Islam.

Media accountability and ethics

In May 2005, British filmmaker Adam Curtis premiered his film, *The Power of Nightmares*, at the Cannes Film Festival. The film offered a historically-based parallel analysis of the rise of fundamentalist thinking among neoconservatives in the United States and among radical Islamists in the Middle East. The two groups worked together to drive the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan during the Cold War, but since 9/11 the radical Islamists have been transformed by those same neoconservatives into enemies in a balance-of-power struggle analogous to the US/USSR showdown. Curtis dares to ask tough questions that no American media outlet would ask: Is the war on terror driven more by illusion and imagination than reality? Is it possible that a war on terror works in the interests of those in power to preserve their position vis-à-vis critics at home and abroad?

Ultimately, he asks us the public to consider what might work in the mutual interest of the neoconservatives and their purported radical Islamist enemies, notably the effort to concentrate power and control public opinion. His three-part documentary series, which first aired on the BBC in autumn 2004 and later on Al Jazeera with an accompanying live interview with Curtis, has yet to be broadcast on television in the United States. In the U.S. it has been shown at a few independent film festivals (Tribeca, San Francisco) to sold out crowds, including the True/False Film Festival in Columbia, Missouri where Curtis made an appearance. But in the U.S., the vast majority of the viewing public is not standing in line at film festivals.

Eight of out 10 Americans get their information about the world from local television news affiliates. Much hyped reporting exists about blogs and the influence of new media (i.e., instant

messaging, Second Life), but over-the-air television is still the most dominant medium of mass distributed information. As such, the picture in our heads remains one presented by the box in our bedroom and living room, not at the independent movie festival. So how have these broadcast media performed in the war on terror?

Overkill is the operative term. The media have managed to secure their place is making us all feel less secure whenever a terrorist incident or attack is reported *ad nauseum*. The U.S.-based Centers for Disease Control predicts that the odds of an American being killed by a terrorist are one in 88,000, while the odds from dying by falling off a ladder are one in 10,010. People are 15 times more likely to die from an automobile crash, and heart disease, cancer, and strokes are the top three lethal killers.¹³

The media do not always follow probability statistics when it comes to their news stories, although from my vantage point in Southern California, the high speed automobile chase is a favourite afternoon drive-by news story. Terrorist acts remain the ultimate aphrodisiac breaking news story. From the perspective of the terrorists who need publicity like they need oxygen, the news gatherers respond to dramatic images as background wallpaper to their soundbites. While they may not be the most romantic bedfellows, the terrorists and the news rooms do function as a marriage of convenience.¹⁴ While some journalists have argued in favour of denying terrorists access to media outlets through more self-restraint, it is unlikely that terrorism's co-dependency with the global media will subside.

Terrorism is psychological warfare that chooses dramatic images over words to communicate its message; the media seek drama, shocking footage, and the unusual story over the everyday news that can hold the attention of the audience to the next commercial. As Gary Sick said about the 444-day Iranian hostage crisis that lasted from 1979-1981, "It may never be known how many pairs of pantyhose and how many tubes of toothpaste were sold to this captive audience as a direct result of the hostage crisis, but the numbers are substantial."¹⁵

Given the tendency for the whole picture to elude most observers in crisis news coverage, it is worthwhile that global citizens pay attention to a number of persuasive "red flag" appeals that are quite common to both government decision makers and the news media. These include appeals to authority (flags, sacred words like democracy, liberty, freedom, powerful people like the president, secretary of state); fear appeals that reinforce governmental authority against the evildoers; appeals to popular passions and tradition or faith; and assumptions of righteousness (our nation is ethical, right, good, pure of heart) coupled with a demonization of the other side (opponent, faceless terrorist).

Walter Lippmann understood in the 1920s that a steady majority of people are driven by social conditioning fed by pseudo events manufactured in the press. In the 2000s, it remains to be seen if we can overcome our unreflective thinking, irrational fears, and intellectual simple-mindedness. Most of us are conditioned to see the world through our national and ethnocentric lenses. The mass media structure themselves to cater to such lenses: "You are either with us or with the terrorists!" It is up to individuals with a strong vision that includes a wider lens on this world to move us from the pseudo-reality of what is to a better world of what may be.

Notes

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